

## Emeritus Professor Max Charlesworth, A.O.

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Max Charlesworth, a leading Australian philosopher and ethicist, was born in 1925 in Numurkah, the younger son of William and Mabel Charlesworth.

Max obtained his B.A. (Hons.) in 1946 and his M.A. in philosophy in 1948. In 1950, he married Stephanie Armstrong. In the same year, Max was the first recipient of the Mannix scholarship for Catholic students to further their studies overseas. However, having contracted TB, he was forced to spend the next 2 years at the Gresswell Sanatorium.

Dissatisfied with what he considered the narrow-minded analytic philosophy he had been taught, Max wanted to study contemporary European philosophy. He took the advice of his professor, Alexander Boyce Gibson, to study at the University of Louvain in Belgium, instead of taking the well-trodden path to Oxford or Cambridge. Max and Stephanie spent 3 years in Louvain, where he was awarded his doctorate ‘avec la plus grande distinction’ in 1955.

Max’s first academic post was as a lecturer in philosophy at the University of Auckland from 1956. In 1959, he returned to the University of Melbourne as lecturer in Philosophy. There, Max taught and worked on mediaeval philosophy, political philosophy, philosophy of religion and pioneered the ground-breaking course ‘Contemporary European Philosophy’, which focused on Sartre and de Beauvoir, Merleau-Ponty and others. Max co-founded the journal *Sophia*, an international journal of the philosophy of religion in 1962.

Max’s seven decades in philosophy spanned philosophy of religion, bioethics, social studies in science, European philosophy, Aboriginal religions and the role of the Church in a liberal democratic state. Max did not see philosophy so much as a technical pursuit as a way of being and a way to communicate with the wider society about the big questions of life. He did this in a wonderfully clear and distinct fashion. Education was Max’s primary focus both in extending the role of the university and going beyond it in reaching out not only to other disciplines but to the general population. He had a pluralist approach to philosophy, religion and how we can best live together in a liberal

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democratic society. His books covered a wide spectrum of topics and included *Church State and Conscience*, *St. Anselm's Proslogion*, *Religious Business: Essays on Australian Spirituality*, *Bioethics in a Liberal Society*, *Philosophy for Beginners*, *The Existentialists and Jean-Paul-Sartre*, and *Life among the Scientists*. He also wrote a book for children, *Religious Worlds*, richly illustrated by Robert Ingpen. With respect to Aboriginal religions, Max, working with anthropologist colleagues, made an important contribution by insisting that these religions should be taken seriously on their own terms as spiritual meaning systems rather than as a type of cultural artefact.

Max saw the job of a philosopher as to be out in the world using critique and reflection, understanding and to welcome a genuine diversity of points of view while at the same time evaluating and critiquing them rigorously. He had a special capacity to communicate complex ideas with appealing simplicity. Max's approach was demonstrated not only in the many books and articles he published but also in action through contributions to higher education, especially the open campus programme at Deakin University together with significant public roles over the decades. Max was intent on taking philosophy beyond the 'ivory tower' of the university and delighted in his many years teaching Adult Education classes in philosophy.

At the height of the Vietnam War in 1968–1969, Max spent time as a visiting professor at the University of Notre Dame, an independent, national research Catholic University in Indiana. This had a profound effect upon him, galvanising his open and critical approach to Catholicism and role in society at large.

While always a devout Catholic, Max's liberalism and philosophical method led him to take a number of positions at odds with that of the Catholic Church hierarchy. One example was his staunch opposition to Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War, often expressed in the pages of *The Catholic Worker*, a journal he co-edited. Max responded to strong criticism from within the Church establishment with his typical grace and generosity. His 2008 book, *A Democratic Church*, challenged the Church to live up to its ideals. An enduring contribution Max and Stephanie made together to the Catholic Church in Australia was their introduction to Australia of the Equipes Notre Dame, a lay movement to develop and strengthen Christian marriage.

Max once observed, 'being a Christian I have always been interested in the relation between philosophy and the Christian religion in its various forms'. In 1966, he was appointed by Pope Paul VI to be a consultant to the newly formed institution, the Secretariat for Non-Believers, an international body of theological and philosophical scholars. The Secretariat's president was Cardinal Franz Koenig, and Max would sometimes recall the meetings held in Rome at the Vatican at which black caviar was served at morning tea!

Max became Head of the Department of Philosophy of the University of Melbourne in 1974–1975. He was then invited by Victoria's fourth university, Deakin, to become Foundation Planning Dean of Humanities in Geelong (1975–1980). In this capacity, Max set up the School of Humanities as interdisciplinary areas involving Philosophical Studies, Australian Studies, Literary Studies and Performing Arts. Because Deakin was established so as not to duplicate other universities, there was licence, and even expectation, to be different. An essential social mission for Deakin fitted closely with Max's values—the innovation of off-campus education with open entry for mature age students. This meant that many people over the age of 21 from all around Australia who

had missed out on study or were interested in further study could undertake courses that engaged them.

The overall aim was not to train professional philosophers but to bring philosophy to a wide range of people who often found it made a significant difference in their lives. The pedagogical mode was very creative, especially for the times: elaborate study guides collections of readings, taped interviews and discussions, and passionate weekend schools. This was certainly a project of 'philosophy in the world'.

Max remained Professor of Philosophy until his retirement in 1990 when he became Emeritus Professor. His guiding spirit is still at Deakin.

He delivered the ABC's Boyer Lectures in 1989 on 'Life, Death, Genes and Ethics: Biotechnology and Bioethics'. In addition to his role as a national innovator in education, Max's contributions to bioethics were recognised nationally when in 1990 he was appointed as an Officer of the Order of Australia for his contributions both to education and to bioethics.

In his retirement, Max continued to be fascinated by the world around him and never stopped writing or trying to make a difference. He was an inspiration for the life of the mind and of critical thinking. His gentle humour, generosity of spirit and love of both people and ideas have influenced many lives, and Max has a special place in the hearts and minds of his many friends, students and colleagues. Max died unexpectedly but peacefully at home on 2 June 2014. He leaves his large and loving family: his beloved wife Stephanie; children Sara, Hilary, Stephen, Lucy, Bruno, Anna and Esther, their partners and 11 grandchildren.